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ABSTRACT

This paper (1) discusses the SQ3R formula for reading: survey, question, read, recite, and review; and (2) proposes a similar formula for remedial composition; R3SW, which means, read, search, select, study, and write. An example of this formula is given, using imperative sentences as the understood subject. In using the composition formula during a class, the teacher demonstrates on the chalkboard a number of examples of imperatively sentences which the students read and analyze. As part of the homework assignment, the students are instructed to search for imperative sentences and select five of them to bring to class. The idea of this exercise is to get the students to discover examples of imperative sentences from sources outside the classroom so they can relate them to nonacademic life. Finally, the students study the features of the imperative sentence, and then write their own. (TS)

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Session 15

READING AND WRITING: PARTNERS IN FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

R3SW

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Before getting into my prepared speech, I would like to relate my remarks to those made in the opening addresses at this morning's session. In recounting the early history of the 4C's, John Gerber referred to the old division between the teachers of composition and the teachers of literature, designating the latter group as the "troglodytes" of the profession. I must point out that I am one of those senior professors of literature, and I must admit that my Ph.D. studies included a literary dissertation. This past summer I was awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to study the sources of Philip Freneau's views of the American Indian, and I recently completed a "troglodytic" (?) monograph on that earth-shaking topic.

Elizabeth McPherson went on to point out how community college faculty are teachers, not scholars, and how they are primarily teachers of composition. Well, I am one of those also, and I am genuinely excited by teaching composition, and I don't regard my present position as a stepping-stone to something which some might regard as more "professionally rewarding."

Yet I think a case can be made for literary scholarship, and I think it's a mistake at this point in the development of our profession to insist upon a division between the teaching of literature and the teaching of composition. Let us do both, but let us do both in such a way as to teach our students the relationship between reading and writing.

In the past, mistakes were made by assuming that the English teacher should teach the <u>content</u> of his/her scholarship. Instead, he should teach the <u>process</u> of the writing he performs to report that scholarship.

To be specific, the material I gathered during my investigation into Fremeau and the Indian can be reduced to about ten minutes of one session of my American Literature course. But what I went through to write a report of my investigation--the collection of information, the establishment of a thesis, the development of that thesis, the selection of examples, the choice of words, the overall organization--in short, the writing process, enables me to present myself to the students in my composition classes as an individual who shares their problems.

In other words, what I see coming out of literary scholarship is feeling between teacher and student of shared experiences in writing: process, not content. Just as, ideally, our creative writing courses are taught by some writer-in-residence who actually writes creative pieces, our expository writing courses should be taught be individuals who, in fact, do expository writing in their profession.

So much for my attempt to relate this morning's opening remarks to the paper I had written for this afternoon's panel discussion. With that framework and relationship established, let me begin.

This year's program theme, "Let the minds of the students be the supreme resource," should be taken literally and seriously in the teaching of remedial composition. No textbook, handbook, workbook, or reader can make a student learn to write; he must learn that himself.

Now you might be thinking, "Of course. Everybody knows that. What's your point?"

Well, I believe that teaching is the process of getting the student to discover things about themselves and about life; I further believe that teaching English means getting him to discover how language makes connections between himself and the world. With this as a basic consideration, then, let me make a specific charge about what I regard as a poor teaching practice, and then offer a specific means of overcoming it.

I think many of us follow the practice of assigning models for students to imitate in some way. By models I don't mean just the essays in the freshman reader; I include all the hundreds and hundreds of examples we write on the chalkboard or flash on the screen to illustrate various rhetorical and grammatical principles. When, for instance, we write on the board a sentence with an adjective clause, we want our students to be able to create their own sentences with adjective clauses. When we point out and explain transitional devices, it is to get them to use transitional devices. And when we have them read and analyze an argumentative essay, it is because we want them to be able to write an argumentative essay. There are countless variations to the practice, but I think it is safe to say that a great many English teachers have been using something like this model approach for a long time.

Now, let's consider something obvious:

If all our students learned what we taught them, we should be happy with the methods we use. In fact, if that were so, I doubt if any of us would feel a need to attend a convention of this sort (unless we're looking for a job).

But I, for one, have not enjoyed that kind of success, and I suspect that many of you have also experienced that special kind of frustration from seeing too little student output from too much teacher input. There must be a better way.

I have come to believe that the better way is to insert an additional step in the learning process between analyzing a model and writing something like it. That additional step is what I call "writing discovery." It calls upon the student to find, in his normal, everyday reading of newspapers, magazines, and textbooks for other courses, examples of writing that are like the models he analyzes in his English class. The theory is that this additional step helps bridge the terribly large gap between seeing an example of, say, introducing an essay with a personal anecdote, and creating one's own introductory personal anecdote.

In other words, instead of the teacher saying, "Here's an example of what I want you to write. Now write one," he says, "Here's an example of what I want you to write. To be sure you understand what it is, find one like it in this morning's newspaper. Now that you can recognize it, write one like it.

The process can be further delineated by means of a formula that some students and/or teachers might find useful. Anyone who has taught remedial reading is familiar with the formula found in the SRA Reading Labs: SQ3R, meaning Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review. Following this formula, the student in the reading class is taught first to survey what he's going to read to get an idea of its length and organization. Then he should pose some questions about the piece so that his reading will be directed toward a specific purpose. Next he reads the piece,

"reciting" to himself the answers to his questions as he finds them. Finally, when finished the actual reading, he reviews everything he learned while it's still fresh on his mind.

Inspired by the SQ3R process, which has been used effectively in remedial reading instruction, I put together a comparable formula for remedial composition: R3SW, which means, Read, Search, Select, Study, Write. Let me show how it works by reference to a very simple example.

Let's say that the lesson for the day is on the imperative sentence with the understood subject. Now if a person has not understood the understood subject by the time he s a twenty-, thirty-, or forty-year-old college freshman, he's going to have a difficult time understanding it. Understood? So some new ingredient in the lesson is called for. During the class the teacher demonstrates on the chalkboard a number of examples of imperative sentences, which the student reads and analyzes. As part of his homework assignment, the student is instructed to search for imperative sentences and select five or ten to bring to class. The teacher might leave the student on his own, or he might direct him to search the comic strips in his newspaper to find some. Lucy and Peppermint Patty are always giving some kind of order to Charlie Brown. Or he might be sent to a recipe on the home page or in a cookbook, where he can be coaxed to distinguish between "Stir the ingredients together" and "The ingredients should now be stirred together." The really hard-up case could be told to read the label on a can of paint--or soup. Everybody ought to be able to find some imperative sentences somewhere. The idea is to get the student to discover examples of

imperative sentences from various aspects of "real life" so he will know they are not merely the kind of thing that belongs in an English book. As a final prelude to actual composition, the student studies the features of the imperative sentence. Then he writes his own.

The exercise may take a few minutes for the superior student to complete, a few hours for the poorer student. Thus it rewards achievement while it also provides a real opportunity for learning. It can be varied in so many ways according to complexity that something can be found for everyone in the class to do. Each student, for example, could be assigned a different kind of reading material or, as I said before, can be left on his own to see what he can find without direction.

Now the R3SW method can be used with more advanced material as well. It can be an effective device for the teaching of organization and even style.

For another example of its possibilities, let's take a lesson on the closing paragraph. The presentation would include the usual examination of sample closing paragraphs from the textbook with, perhaps, a few handout prepared from past essays of good students. But before we ask this group of students to write a closing paragraph, we test their ability to recognize the elements a good closing should have. We tell them to read the closing paragraphs of each chapter in their history or sociology textbook and select what they regard as the best one. Then we ask them to defend their choices by explaining what it is they felt was noteworthy. Once the student discovers for himself why some closing are better than others, he is more able to write his own closings for his own essays.

Again, of course, the exercise can be made simple or demanding, or somewhere in between, according to the needs and abilities of the students, but again there should be something for everybody.

Having used the writing discovery method for several semesters in teaching remedial composition, I'm rather pleased with the results. Though I can't brag that everyone now writes A papers all the time, I can claim that it seems to help the students make the leap from observation of the teacher's work to the creation of their own. But what I like most about it is that it forces the student to do something we all know he does not do enough of: read.

He cannot complete a writing discovery exercise without reading. By using this device for a variety of lessons in grammar, sentence structure, paragraph organization, thesis development, narration, description, style, rhetoric, figurative language, etc., the teacher makes the student read a variety of material he might not otherwise read; or at least it forces him to seek comprehension of what his eyes might merely have passed over.

And reading, I think, is the better way toward improving writing skills.